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ABSTRACT

Elementary school students should be given opportunities to participate in a variety of experiences and to develop their language skills through talking about these experiences. Children develop self-confidence by expressing their ideas and, upon seeing their words written down, also become interested in the processes of writing and reading. To bridge the gap between oral and written composition, an experiment employing dictation was conducted in grades 1, 2, and 3. Teachers began by transcribing children's stories, feelings, and ideas without changing the wording, until the children progressed, at their own speeds, to writing on their own. It was found that those children accustomed to dictation demonstrated a higher degree of fluency, in both oral and written communication, than those not accustomed to it. Other benefits appearing to derive from dictation were growth in vocabulary, a sense of punctuation acquired from intonation, and practice in establishing sequence and organization of ideas. (LH)

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DICTATION: A BRIDGE BETWEEN ORAL AND WRITTEN COMPOSITION

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What is school? Will it be fun? Will my teacher like me? Such are the anticipations of young children as they stream into classroom each fall. The healthy, lively ones are usually full of excitement, yet somewhat awed by the strange and often austere environment in which they suddenly find themselves.

Last fall a news commentator concluded his nightly broadcast with this injunction: "Tommorrow my boy goes to school. He is so curious and interested in everything and is especially excited about school. All I ask of you, teachers, is that you strive to keep this excitement forever in his heart and eyes."

To me this father was saying give my child the opportunity to explore his surroundings, the world in which he lives; help him to feel, to see, to hear, to be sensitive to life about him. This would include people, things, and common everyday experiences. I think he was saying, do not stifle his spirit of inquiry, his creative urges, and most of all do not make him hate school. I'm sure he was saying give him a chance to express himself.

The ability to use oral language is the child's greatest asset in learning. Speech is our basic language, the foundation of symbolic communication, yet teachers are continually admonishing children to be quiet in the classroom. Some strive to keep children in their seats and forbid them to converse with a neighbor without permission. If children are to develop fluency and command of language in its written form, they must have ample experiences in oral expression. There must be time during the early school experiences for talking together, planing together, sharing experiences, telling stories, and exchanging ideas about many things and many activities.

Nothing will give a child more security in his academic work than the ability to express himself and to feel that what he says will be heard and appreciated by his friends. Needed is a classroom environment which allows children to freely exchange ideas so that power to use language both in oral and written form is enhanced.

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Through practice in expressing himself orally, a child develops confidence. As he builds language, he builds a healthy self-concept which is essential to all learning. Talk and much of it should precede writing. Children should be encouraged to talk about hobbies, toys, games, trips and other experiences before they write about them.

Children do not progress at the same rate in their ability to speak; consequently, some children are not ready to write as early as others. Patience on the part of the teacher and ample time to grow into language power through oral activities must be the treatment for many children, especially if they are among the so-called socially and culturally disadvantaged of our nation. Given time and a chance to listen to other children talk, the shy, less articulate child frequently emerges from his insecurity to voice his opinions, express a desire or even relate an experience.

One's environment, experiences, and reactions to life in general determine his language achievement. For some children, experience is the most essential component for language development. They have few, if any experiences to relate. Sensitivity to life about them is nil. Needless to say, field trips, excursions, visuals, and many ordinary experiences must be provided for children who enter school with nothing to talk about. They must have something to say before they can be expected to talk.

Personal satisfaction in learning and creating is basic to growth in personality and social development. Thus, children should be encouraged to participate in a variety of experiences which they can talk about in order to develop the security and knowledge needed for self-expression. Given varied and numerous experiences appropriate to their readiness, and given the opportunity to talk about them, children will grow in ability to express themselves.

Early childhood is accompanied by an attitude of curiosity, originality, experimental investigation, inventiveness and creativity. It is not surprising that between two and eight have been reported the most productive in language learnings.

Unless this discovery is to be completely ignored, the instructional approaches must be planned thoroughly and carefully to permit freedom of thought and at the same time cultivate language growth. First of all a child must have confidence in his

ability to be understood when he talks. When he sees his ideas take form on a chart, a tablet, or a chalkboard, he learns that his oral language can be recorded in symbols, or words, to be read by himself and others. He knows that in time he will write his own ideas for others to read. Through dictation he can progress from oral to written expression in a very normal, natural way, without strain and anxiety. Reading and writing are merely extensions of oral language and can be developed as naturally as walking and talking if ample encouragement is provided and if sufficient time is allowed for growth and development.

A child learning to walk stumbles and falls many times before he gains balance, coordination and security to freely move about. Lovingly, he is lifted to his feet again and again and encouraged to repeat his attempts. Words of exhilaration and glee incite him to further accomplishments in terms of distance and precision. A child learning to write and read needs the same loving, helpful attention in bridging the gap from oral speech to written symbols. In addition to skill development in mechanics, he needs time to develop physical and mental coordination required for written communication. Dictation is the bridge that lessens the gap between what he can do with oral language and what he cannot do with written language.

I can best expand this thesis by using examples from an experimental study now in progress under my own direction with the cooperative efforts of two classroom teachers. The purpose of the study is to determine how well pupils can learn the mechanics of written composition through the functional use of writing--writing for a definite purpose, including writing to express personal feelings or to share an imaginative story. By far the most influential factor in developing independence and skill in writing has been the use of dictation in grades one and two, and its continued use in grade three when the occasion calls for it.

Like most first graders, the children identified with this study came to school the first day eager to learn. The more vociferous pupils had personal experiences

that couldn't wait for sharing. Clamoring for the teacher's undivided attention, these youngsters freely spilled out their feelings and related their experiences without reservations. Each teacher, realizing that spontaneity is vital to learning, did not demand absolute quiet or the "do not speak until you are called upon" routine. On the contrary, she delayed what she was doing, the usual chores related to the first day, and listened attentively to the children.

Mrs. B. did more than listen. She unobtrusively jotted down the stories about Judy's birthday, John's loose tooth, Gene's hamster, and Sherry's vacation. When the bell rang and school officially began, she learned about other children: what they liked, how they felt, where they had been, what kinds of pets they owned, the new clothes they were wearing, and other news and bits of personal interests. During this first day and subsequent days that ran into weeks, Mrs. B. wrote narrative stories from interviews, show and tell periods, and free chatter. She hung these stories around the walls of the room and intermittently read them to the class. Her suggestion that each author illustrate his chart story to make it more personal was readily accepted.

In an adjoining classroom Mrs. M., who also was aware of the need of each child to express himself, had made preparations for this emotional outlet. Newsprint sheets had been folded to make booklets for children's personal stories. They were encouraged to draw what they wanted to tell others about themselves or their families. Sitting beside each child at intervals during the following weeks, Mrs. M. wrote in her very best manuscript and in their exact words, stories the children wished to share. Only incorrect usage was changed, substituting saw for seen, gone for went, and so forth to let children hear the correct pattern.

The important factor in dictation is recording in the child's own words what he thinks and feels. Any attempt to change his wording is apt to produce a feeling of inadequacy as well as distort his true meaning. It is highly important to record

exactly what the child has said for another reason. There is no reading matter that can possibly challenge the young reader as much as his own words. He likes to hear them read over and over again; he likes to share his creations.

Others in the field have prepared us to accept the efforts of children regardless of the poor offerings which they share. Children in this study are permitted freedom of expression void of restrictions or negative criticisms in both oral and written composition. Only praise for quality speaking and writing is the policy for evaluation; there is no marking of children's papers to indicate errors. When writings are to be shared, the pupils work in pairs evaluating each other's papers or each has a conference with the teacher at which time she helps with the spelling of unfamiliar words and hears the child read his composition orally in order to check punctuation.

As children continue to produce story after story, we have discovered in them a strong impulse to either write or dictate for entertainment of the class or to satisfy their own inner cravings and needs. Another writing stimulator is the teacher's attitude. If she demonstrates a willingness to write as the child organizes his thoughts into words and an eagerness to listen to his stories or to read what he has written, a good relationship is nurtured and the child's creativity and language abilities are intensified. The act of composing is indeed a challenge.

Progressing with the pupils to second, and now into the third and terminal year of study, the two teachers continue to express amazement at the ease and fluency, both in oral and written composition, demonstrated by children who have been in the study for the duration. Upon completion of the experiment, teachers may give less direct attention to evaluation of growth in writing; there may be less filing and less record keeping for these teachers in the future, however, dictation will continue to be a major factor in language development when these teachers return to first grades next year. They are convinced that the time spent in recording the ideas, feelings, personal reflections, and imaginative thinking of children is, after all, not only a

practical and effective way to teach composition, but also an economical way to nurture language growth in general.

Dictation serves many purposes:

1. It gives the child a feeling of belonging when his words are recorded for others to hear or to read.

2. It relieves the child of the inadequate feeling--I know what I want to say but can't write it.

3. It challenges the child to read since he likes to see in print what he has said; he likes to read it. This point is aptly illustrated by a direct quote from a fourth grade pupil who was having difficulty in reading. When asked by his teacher if he could read the story he had dictated, replied, "Of course I can read it. I said it."

4. It helps the child develop sentence sense. He learns about the structure of language.

5. It makes the child aware of the importance of punctuation in writing in order to insure appropriate voice intonations and safegard meaning. Later this information becomes useful in his own writing.

6. Thinking is fortified when ideas are put into oral expression for dictation.

Following field trips, investigations in science, art expressions, and other activities, children were given the opportunity to talk about the experiences, to share their feelings and give additional information from their personal storehouse of knowledge and experiences. Many of these experiences were recorded for permanent files to be read again for fun or to be used as a reference in some point of discussion. Throughout the early weeks in first grade teachers recorded as children dictated narrative reports, greetings, letters, memos, lists of jobs to be completed, diary entries, etc. Cooperative compositions and /or individual compositions were dictated each day as the need was manifested. Excessive, aimless dictation was avoided in the interest of functional writing.

Taking into consideration the purpose of the writing, the interest and enthusiasm of the children, and the appropriateness of the occasion, teachers freed themselves to listen and to write as children composed. To illustrate:

(1) When children finished a picture at the easel or at their seats, the teacher sat beside them and wrote what they wanted to say about the picutre. It may have been a sentence or it may have been several sentences. Complete stories accompanied the pictures as children gained power in language and confidence in creating characters, situations, and story plot. The writings were attached to the picture or written on the back. The picture accompanied by the writing may have gone into the child's folder, become a booklet to be shared with the class, or taken home to be shared with his family.

(2) When the new wing was added to the school, children could hardly pull themselves away from the scene of construction. During playtime they watched the big shovel eat into the side of the hill and lift out the dirt. Fascinated by the crane that hoisted men and machinery to the high steel beams above the ground, children stood transfixed. Upon entering the classroom, they dictated to their diary, thus keeping a progress chart of the building development.

(3) A visit to the pet shop was an occasion for individual writings. As each child reacted verbally to his visit, the teacher recorded his thoughts.

(4) Visits to the newspaper office, the dairy barns, the greenhouse, the weather station and other centers of interest were reported through cooperative dictation. Children decided what to tell, then cooperatively arrived at a satisfactory sentence order for the dictated reports. These reports were either copied individually or machine duplicated and personally signed to be shared with parents.

(5) Science experiments and investigations were often followed by dictation in order to record children's reactions as well as to clarify understandings. Daily records were kept as seeds turned into sprouts, then into growing plants. Turtles, hamsters, and other pets provided occasions to observe and write.

(6) Pupils dictated the endings to stories from their own imagination.

(7) Entire original stories were dictated when children were highly motivated and the teacher had the time to write.

Personal observations and creative stories came so fast it was impossible for the teachers to record all that the children wanted to dictate. On numerous occasions student teachers from the college visited the rooms and became secretaries for the children. Teacher aids and older pupils in the school were also beneficial in this capacity.

By the end of the first semester many first grade children were writing their own stories, but for some the job of managing handwriting and spelling was too much.

In second grade, and now in third grade the children are doing much of their own writing, but even so, their stories are longer, their observations more sophisticated and elaborate, hence, dictation continues for these children. The majority, however, have made tremendous growth in oral lanugage as a result of organizing their thoughts for dictated compositions.

What did they learn about mechanics? Everything. Their first attempts at writing for themselves proved they could use quotation marks, exclamation marks, commas and periods beyond what might normally be expected. They had learned that a sentence must convey an idea. Elements of sentence structure and punctuation had been taught as they watched the teacher record their statements.

How they love to use exclamations in their own writing:

My! oh, my! A crane was working.

My! oh, my! My father's cow had a baby cow on Thursday.

Windy! Windy! March.
Oh! How the wind blows.

And the apostrophies just flew:

Kathy's father ---
Father's cow -----
Steve's tooth ----
My puppy's name -- and this one continues with My puppy says, "Bow wow! I want some meat." (Quotation marks supplied by the child)

Using commas in a series was no chore for David:

I have a pretty teacher.
She sometimes has to fuss at Tony,
Joyce and Janie, too.
But never at me.

Science investigations were not only a source of learning through discovery, but a definite challenge in language. The explosive responses of the children often paralleled the chemical reaction in the experiment. Such was the case when they learned about carbon dioxide. Following is a report as it was dictated to the teacher. One child was given the responsibility of copying it for the cooperative science booklet.

OUR EXPLOSION

We put vinegar and baking soda in a test tube. We shook the test tube. Pow! Kerboom! Pop! The baking soda and vinegar caused carbon dioxide gas. The gas blew the lid off the test tube. We are going to try this at home.

Attention was given to selective words describing the explosion, the sequence of happenings and punctuation for appropriate meaning. One child said she was surprised at the reaction of the mixture of vinegar and soda. The teacher, writing the word on the board, said, "That is a good word for what happened."

An integrated experience such as the one described, makes learning functional and meaningful. The pupils had a science lesson, a language lesson and a reading lesson all tied into a delightful, yet purposeful, learning experience.

How does a teacher find time for hearing stories and for taking dictation? There are numerous ways depending on the nature of the occasion and the ingenious efforts of the teacher. If an activity seems important, we manage to find time for it. The teachers in the experiment provided time each day for visiting with certain individual children and recording stories while other children read independently, completed seat work, engaged in art activities or worked puzzles. The typewriter and tape recorder took much of the drudgery and fatigue from the writing. During second grade, pupils did much writing on their own. The teachers often stopped by the desks of the less inspired or the less capable writers to give encouragement to their creative spirits or to help with spelling or writing chores. Dictation can take the drudgery out of composition for many children and add to the quality of thought. When children are freed of the responsibility of spelling words they want to use but cannot spell and trying to produce the symbols with handwriting skills barely learned, their imaginative powers are enhanced and their quality of speech is increased. Strictly speaking, pupils should be permitted to progress from dictation to independent writing according to their own rate of growth. Freedom of expression is more important than

correct speech. Usage and grammar in oral expression is not criticized; neither is spelling, handwriting, nor the general appearance of a paper subjected to fixed standards of composition. Examples from the teacher's own speech and selections shared from literature have marked effects on pupils' improvement in speech and writing. Complimentary remarks and other outward expressions from teachers showing their appreciation of good writing encourage young children toward better expression.

Classroom climate is of utmost importance in helping children create stories whether for dictation or independent writing. Friendly warm feelings for each other, a spirit of helpfulness, and time to laugh and sigh together over characters and episodes creates a feeling of togetherness.

With a sense of security and pride in self-expression nurtured through many and varied opportunities to talk, the child begins to write as a natural outgrowth of oral language. If handwriting skills and auditory perception have been developed simultaneously with oral language, the child will gradually and naturally grow in ability to handle written communication. He can write as he feels and observes because of his security with language, his ability to perceive sound represented by letters, and because handwriting presents no problem.

Unfortunately, some children fail to develop these tools to the degree that they can be used effectively in primary grades. For such children dictation continues as long as they demonstrate the need. As we have already indicated, dictation is a tool used throughout the elementary school when children are unable to write as well as they think. No child should be denied the opportunity to compose his thoughts just because he has difficulty in writing them on paper.

Although the major purpose of the experiment reported in this paper is to determine how well children can learn to write through dictation and actual writing needs in school and out, there are other significant observations worthy of mention. For instance, growth in vocabulary automatically accompanies wide participation in oral composition and dictation. Continuous practice in establishing sequence and in

organizing ideas has had marked influence on structure. Finally, the spontaneity with which children continue to write has surpassed our expectations.

At this point a short story is offered as final proof that dictation is a reliable bridge connecting oral and written composition. Eric's story of "The Tiger Who Went on a Vacation" illustrates this second grader's ability to say what he wants to say and his skill in using mechanics to safeguard his meaning.

A Tiger Who Went on a Vacation

Once there was a tiger. The tiger went on a vacation. He wanted to stay at the animal Hotel. So he did. He called roomservice. And ordered 750 french cottails. He had fun drinking. French cottails were good very very good! He had fun. He got fat? No! He got drunk.

Eric